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FM AMEMBASSY DOHA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9056
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0227

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000318

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KTIP](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#)
SUBJECT: AL JAZEERA TACKLES LABOR CONDITIONS IN QATAR

Classified By: CDA MICHAEL A. RATNEY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- The Al Jazeera English channel broadcast a three-minute report on unfair labor conditions in Qatar on April 10, tying the workers' situation of squalid living conditions, unpaid status, and heavy indebtedness to the global economic crisis.

-- The journalist who filed the report said that, in reality, the workers "have no idea the global economy is in crisis," because "they have been living in these conditions in Qatar for years." Realizing what a sensitive topic labor rights are in Qatar, however, he did not want to address systemic labor problems, and instead decided to limit his focus to payment problems that may be linked to the global downturn.

-- A producer at Al Jazeera, whose report on general labor conditions in Qatar was shelved two years ago, said the April 10 broadcast demonstrates that the "door is now open" on this subject, which she attributes to the leadership of Al Jazeera English Director Tony Burman and the "real journalists" that he has brought on board since joining the station in the summer of 2008.

(C) COMMENTS

-- It has become conventional wisdom that Al Jazeera does not feature reporting about Qatar, with the official explanation for this being that "nothing of international importance happens in Qatar." In reality, Al Jazeera does occasionally report on happenings in Qatar, including conferences, major statements by the leadership, and economic developments.

-- What Al Jazeera has resolutely steered away from, however, is reporting on anything politically controversial in Qatar, including labor conditions.

-- Taken together with other actions the Qataris have initiated over the past several months, the fact that Al Jazeera is now reporting on this previously taboo subject may be another sign that the Qatari Government is more serious about addressing the rights of foreign laborers in Qatar.

END KEY POINTS AND COMMENTS

¶1. (U) Casey Kaufman, an American citizen journalist working with Al Jazeera English, one of the Al Jazeera Network's seven stations broadcast worldwide, filed a report on April 10 highlighting the plight of a group of Nepali construction workers living in poor conditions in Doha who have not been paid for four months. Kaufman begins the broadcast by stating that the global economic crisis has "led to a darker reality" for workers like these, noting that trade unions are

not allowed in Qatar, and that complaining can lead to deportation. Video shots of the workers show cramped living conditions, while the voice-over states that 18 men are living in a two-room apartment.

¶2. (U) Kaufman interviews the workers' company manager who, under conditions of anonymity, states that if contractors do not pay sub-contractors, then workers cannot get paid. Kaufman notes in his voice-over that it is unclear whether contractors are truly experiencing liquidity problems, or are just using the economic crisis as an excuse to withhold payments.

¶3. (C) Contacted separately, Kaufman told PAO that he had visited eight camps and was struck by the fact that "these guys aren't thinking about the economic crisis at all. They have been living in these conditions since they arrived in this country." Although there was no pressure from his superiors, Kaufman said, he thought it was better not to target the labor problem in general, but to tie it to the economic crisis so that it did not cross political sensitivities.

¶4. (C) Asked to describe his understanding of those sensitivities, Kaufman replied that "it's hard to know" because no one inside Al Jazeera really talks about them. "We know that certain subjects are sensitive, and we know who our bosses are," he said, "but I have not seen any significant amounts of pressure not to file certain stories."

¶5. (C) Phuong-Y Nguyen, a Canadian producer at Al Jazeera

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English whose own report on labor conditions in Qatar was put on the shelf by Al Jazeera managers two years ago, told PAO that Kaufman's report proves that "the door is open" on the labor issue. Asked what changed, Nguyen pointed to the leadership of Tony Burman, another Canadian brought in to head the English channel in the summer of 2008, and the "real journalists" that he has since brought on board.

¶6. (C) Nguyen said that the airing of the April 10 broadcast has inspired her to renew her effort to produce a longer report on general labor conditions, that would include interviews with Qatari officials. "When we tried two years ago, the best we could get was someone from the National Human Rights Committee," Nguyen said, "but you just can't have a full report on labor issues without a Qatari Government voice."
Ratney